

Seeing all these letters drop must seem pretty sudden. For me, however, everything has been moving at a snail's pace. The issues that got us here have been wearing me down for a long time, and frankly I'm exhausted. It's really hard to be a neutral party trying to support those on both sides of every argument and defuse situations rather than escalate them. It's really hard to keep pushing and pushing for changes that never come. Please understand that I, along with many others throughout MAGFest's leadership, have explored every avenue to avoid landing where we are today, but having exhausted our options and ourselves we are now inevitably approaching a most painful junction. In short, as much as we love and admire the members of our board, they are not suited for their current roles, and it's time for them to step down.

The members of our board of directors are great people, with long histories with the organization, and incredible dedication. Dom can absolutely demolish a keyboard, whether by playing music or by writing code. Eli managed to translate the fundamental workings and structure of the org into software and wrote Uber. Jack managed the staff of an exploding organization through its adolescence. The people on the board right now are the ones from when the top of our org chart had names, not titles. I can say without reservation that MAGFest would not be what it is today without these people.

But when was the last time the board needed to write software? Or assign hotel rooms to 1,200 staffers? The fact of the matter is that the role these people find themselves in is not the one they practiced for. The members of the board today are the managers of the event from yesterday, and an effective board does not exercise management. The role of an effective board is to exercise governance. Having a board of directors on top, our org chart is shaped like an hourglass. Ideally, the narrowest point is where management decisions start, delegating down from there. By keeping the head of management to as few people as possible we can stay agile while also having consistency in direction. In order to maintain power of vision available to a larger group, the board sits above this point, and is responsible for looking at the bigger picture and the state of the world in general to help steer and guide those below. This is governance. As you can read in our letters today, this work is largely abandoned in favor of the board bypassing their position in the org chart to exercise management directly. This undermines the purpose of the management nexus and means we lack agility and consistency. It also means the board is too busy to look out ahead and steer the ship, and this year we have nearly run aground.

The people on the board today learned their roles in MAGFest at a time when being a manager meant being a firefighter. Back then, everything was burning so there was no time for real governance. Every detail could be an existential threat, so they were right to spend their time on them. Over time as the org chart grew taller, fewer and fewer fires rose to the top. This led to a conflict. Having run events myself, I can attest that putting out fires is addictive. The adrenaline rush when everything is on the line and you have to think on your feet is incredible. But as the org got bigger and bigger these fast burning small fires stopped making it up the chain. Of course they were still present, but they were handled. Remember this slide?

“Train your replacement” IF you don't.....



Magfest Sat night, 6am.
I look like a terrorist.

Dom eating burrito
random person
handed to him
because no actual
time to eat



Dirt on Magfest shirt
from crawling under
stage



The board has trained their replacements, but they never trusted them. They know the fires are still down there somewhere, and they are pushing people around to find them. Like junkies looking for one more adrenaline hit. Meanwhile the org smolders with much bigger but slower and less exciting embers. With the board so distracted from their role of governance, if we survive the pandemic it will be thanks to more luck than we have any right to have relied on.

Communication is an overloaded buzzword, but the consequences of poor communication are concrete. Communication with the board is at an all time low, and as such trust has completely broken down. A little over a year ago, we began having everyone in the orbit of the board sign non-disclosure agreements. In theory, this was meant to allow them to open up about what they were working on, and thus we'd be able to broaden the two-way street. It was a stop-gap, to be sure, as nothing in governance should require such a closed room, but it should have allowed us to start pulling apart the issues they were actively working on. Instead, things have turned into a regime of secrecy. I can hardly think anymore, as now I have to keep track of the source of every thought. I can't talk to any of my colleagues anymore, because I signed away my rights to. And I absolutely cannot talk to the board anymore, because if they find I know something I shouldn't then they launch an inquisition. This has happened a number of times now. It's probably the most stupid thing I've seen. The CIA can't keep secrets, the NSA can't keep secrets. If our organization can only function in secrecy then we will inevitably fail. It's not even like we have good secrets anyways. We don't have nukes. Ask me in two years when my NDA expires.

What communication remains has become similarly strained. As board members begin to step back and reduce their level of involvement in the organization, they turn into ghosts. The standard form of communication with the board is now a Three Hour Phone Call with one of the remaining active members, which is often a veiled boss battle with such a spectre. In a THPC

battle all points raised are useless as no one has concrete knowledge of the spectre, and thus everything can be placed at their feet. For all the THPCs I've participated in I don't think I've changed a thing.

Even joining meetings has been particularly painful for me. For years every meeting I've sat in has inevitably received an agenda item to discuss my standing. I'll get reassured that they always value my input, they just have to decide whether or not I'm allowed to be read in on something. Or they aren't sure why I would be there. Maybe I'm the volunteer representative? The first couple times I expected this treatment, as we were strangers to each other. However, after years of working together I had hoped things would normalize. Every communication and decision is made on the spot, and so there is a general lack of consistency or broader planning. Communications with the board are universally unproductive because they enter them with fundamentally different goals. When I speak with someone my goal may be to convey information, to change their mind, or even to inform my own opinions. The board seemingly enters any conversation with the goal of defusing a situation. They accept any criticism, assign blame for disagreement to someone not present if possible, or if not maybe offer a blanket dismissal without enough specificity for retort. After years of conflict with those outside their group they are once bitten, twice shy, now unwilling to stand behind their beliefs and put their opinions on the line.

The communication issues and managerial issues form a self-sustaining cycle. I think this is why the only way forward has become such a drastic move as wholesale replacement of the board. Through years of reinforcement the ties inside the room have dwarfed any remaining ties the board has to the rest of the organization. Every decision has become reframed into choice between their vision of the organization and some corruptive outside force. Every communication is designed to minimize the backlash from the volunteers. Their intentions may be good, they want what's best for us after all, but at some point the level of hubris in believing they know what's best for us in spite of our stated goals becomes sinful.

The only managerial task properly assigned to the board is the evaluation of the Executive Director. I will leave discussion of their performance in this task to the authors of other letters. For everything else, there is someone better qualified, better positioned, and more available. They needed to relinquish these tasks, and focus on governance. They needed to communicate with those at every level of the organization both to inform their management of the Executive Director, and to better inform their governance decisions. They needed to extend some modicum of trust and respect to the volunteers and professionals grinding away to support them. They needed to be introspective of their actions and the effects they have. They should have done all these things. They have been given as many chances to do so as could possibly be extended. Today, I have run out of patience, and now I believe it is time for them to get out of the way to allow others to step up.